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Cattle disease zoning splits ranchers

By JENNIFER McKEE
Gazette State Bureau

HELENA - A plan to split Montana into two zones to manage a cattle disease has likewise divided the state's two largest cattle groups.

Now, the fate of the plan itself is unknown. Without it, all Montana ranchers could face roadblocks to selling their cattle out of state if another case of brucellosis is found in the state within the next 18 months. However, others fear the plan would create an animal disease sacrifice zone in Montana and waste valuable time and energy better spent keeping brucellosis out of the state entirely.

For every upside (to the plan), there is also a big concern against implementing it," said Christian Mackay, the Montana Board of Livestock's executive officer. "We mostly need to hear from the (livestock) industry as to what they think."

A split state

When seven cows in Montana tested positive for brucellosis in May, it started a federal clock ticking. If another Montana animal comes down with the disease in the next 18 months, the federal government would revoke Montana's official "brucellosis-free" status. That would force ranchers to spend time and money testing certain cattle bound for out-of-state markets. Others, like ranchers who specialize in breeding stock, could have a more difficult time selling their cattle products to buyers wary of the disease.

Brucellosis is a disease of cattle, bison and elk that can cause females to abort their offspring. After years of effort, the disease has been eradicated in almost all American cattle, although it persists in bison and elk of Yellowstone National Park. The disease was first transmitted to park wildlife by domestic stock decades ago.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer said in an interview last week that he started looking for a way to soften the blow of brucellosis should another case appear. At Schweitzer's prodding, officials with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the federal agency that oversees agricultural health and enforces federal brucellosis rules, told the governor this summer that there was one potential way Montana could blunt the full impact of a second brucellosis case.

For when a second case comes up, Montana could apply for something called "split-state status." Under this scenario, APHIS would break Montana into two zones. One zone would be the area around Yellowstone National Park, where brucellosis is most likely to appear in domestic livestock. The other zone would be the rest of the state. Only the Yellowstone zone would lose its brucellosis-free status, and ranchers there would be subject to the federal rules requiring more testing. The rest of the state would be considered disease-free.

Schweitzer said he sees merit in pursuing the split-state idea. Ideally, no more cattle would contract the disease, he said. But if a second one does appear, the state could be ready to apply for split-state status by starting now to meet APHIS' 11 requirements for the designation.

If we do get a second case, then we can proactively make sure the rest of Montana still doesn't lose," he said.

Schweitzer also said he doesn't want to force the idea on the cattle industry. He turned the idea over to the Montana Board of Livestock to get a sense of what ranchers want.

Worlds apart

If the official stance of Montana's two largest cattle groups is any indication, however, the industry appears divided.

The Montana Stockgrowers Association has formally come out against split-state status. Errol Rice, the group's executive director, said creating a disease zone around Yellowstone would divide Montana ranchers at a time when the industry will need to be united against the common threat of disease. He also said gaining the status would involve a lot of work for little guaranteed benefit. While the federal government may recognize Montana's split status, any individual state could choose not to recognize the designation, which is quite rare for brucellosis. Already, North Dakota has put up barriers to Montana cattle coming into that state from most Montana counties that are not close to the North Dakota line.

Rice said he thought it made more sense for Montana to put its energies into regaining the entire state's brucellosis-free status, rather than excluding a small piece, should the disease recur.

Finally, he said, there's a sentiment among some Yellowstone area ranchers that the split-state idea relegates them to a brucellosis sacrifice zone.

"We feel a little bit discriminated against here," he said, adding that the agencies charged with managing the elk and bison that transmit brucellosis to cattle have so far failed to get the disease out of the wild animals, while local ranchers pay the price.

The Montana Cattlemen's Association, meanwhile, has come out in favor of the plan. The group hosted a series of meetings over the late summer and fall with ranchers to see where they stand on the split-state plan.

"There's a whole lot of Montana that's outside the area of high risk," said Jeremy Seidlitz, that group's executive director. "This is just a way to protect the rest of the state."

Seidlitz said he doesn't think the proposal pits rancher against rancher. Instead, it offers a way to help some Montana ranchers while the state works to get the disease out of the Yellowstone zone, too.

"This is just a short-term solution to protect our industry," he said.

Seidlitz said he thinks the split among ranchers is based more on geographical lines than philosophical ones. The ranchers within the would-be disease zone oppose being broken away from other Montana ranchers and subjected to more onerous rules. But ranchers farther away from the park generally support the idea, under the argument that why should they suffer for a disease their animals are very unlikely to have.

Not a long-term answer

Even if Montana ended up with a split-state status, it would not be a long-term solution to the brucellosis problem, said Teresa Howes, an APHIS spokeswoman. The federal government has spent billions of dollars trying to eradicate the disease from America's cattle as a whole. Today, every state except Texas is classified as brucellosis-free.

Whenever the disease pops up again, it causes international trade problems, she said. So, even if the agency recognized a Yellowstone zone as having brucellosis, APHIS would continue to work to wipe the disease out

of that area, too.

Schweitzer said he is waiting to hear the Board of Livestock's recommendations, although he referred to the split-state concept as a potential "life rope" for the majority of Montana ranchers.

Schweitzer said he is especially concerned about the Montana ranchers who specialize in purebred cattle and can fetch top dollar for frozen calf embryos or bull semen from their cattle lines. Losing the brucellosis-free status could deal the biggest blow to that part of Montana's cattle industry.

Mackay said the livestock board will take up the issue at its next meeting in early November. For now, Mackay said, he is withholding judgment on the split-state idea, adding that he has heard from ranchers on all sides of the issue.

One thing everyone seems to agree on is the need for a permanent solution to the Yellowstone Park brucellosis problem. The disease has been purged from Montana's cattle herd for more than 20 years. The only reason it persists as a threat today is because bison and elk in Yellowstone National Park carry the disease, which, ironically, they originally contracted from domestic cattle.

A lot of folks would like to see ranch practices applied to Yellowstone," Seidlitz said.

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